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SUBJECT: CHIRAC'S BASTILLE DAY INTERVIEW: A WEAKENED  
PRESIDENT STRUGGLING TO COME BACK

REF: PARIS 4900

Classified By: Minister Counselor for Political Affairs Josiah Rosenblatt for reason 1.4 (b) and (d)

#### SUMMARY

1. (SBU) Fighting to re-establish his relevance, President Chirac began the now traditional Bastille Day interview of France's President by casting himself as the leader of France's anti-terrorism effort. Thereafter, in the hour-long exchange with two leading TV anchorpersons, Chirac focused on 1) raising the morale of the French by highlighting the positive in France's current situation, 2) insisting that "the psychological moment" was right for the Villepin government to undertake difficult reforms to diminish unemployment, and 3) announcing a set of measures aimed at synergizing academic research and business innovation in France. The political context for Chirac is bleak; even so, asked if he would run again in 2007, Chirac was non-committal. His approval ratings are at record lows for presidents of France's Fifth Republic (in place since 1959), and his long-time rival in his own center-right, current Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy, has of late stepped up his challenges (septel) to the president's leadership. End Summary.

#### FIGHTING IRRELEVANCE

2. (SBU) The public's rejection of the proposed EU Constitution on May 29, the hasty change of government forced on him by the stinging defeat in that referendum, Paris' unexpected loss of the right to host the 2012 Olympic games, an economy that has long sputtered along without strong growth, and the insistent challenges to his leadership credibility from long-time rival Nicolas Sarkozy (septel) have severely diminished President Chirac's national standing. In recent weeks Chirac's approval ratings have fallen to around 22 percent, all-time lows for Chirac and reportedly the lowest ever for any president of France's Fifth Republic (De Gaulle, Pompidou, Giscard, Mitterrand and Chirac). The now traditional Bastille Day (July 14) extended interview from the Elysee Palace has usually served to give a preview of the key themes and policy initiatives envisioned by the president for the coming -- September - June -- "political year." (For example, last year, Chirac used the occasion to announce the May 29 referendum on the proposed EU constitution). This year, discredited and with the lack of vision for which he has long been faulted painfully evident, Chirac's use of the occasion was limited to trying to re-establish his continued relevance to guiding France into the future.

#### LEADING FRANCE'S FIGHT AGAINST TERRORISM

3. (SBU) Chirac underscored that no country is immune to the scourge of terrorist attacks, and clearly implied that the French should not entertain any false hopes that their country might somehow be excepted from that. Chirac depicted himself as exercising active oversight of the effort to protect citizens from terrorism. Chirac also insisted on France's solidarity with Britain and admiration for the British people. He recalled how, at the Gleneagles G8 Summit, the attacks prompted a new unity among the leaders present, which would be translated into action by closer anti-terrorism cooperation, in particular with France's European partners.

#### FOCUS ON FRANCE'S STRENGTHS

4. (SBU) Throughout the hour-long interview, Chirac repeatedly returned to those aspects of France's current situation that should give the restive French public good reason to be optimistic about the future. In particular, Chirac repeatedly evoked the strength of France's export sector (France is the world's fifth largest economy and fourth largest exporter), the scale and know-how of France's agro-industries (which should become more valuable as world population grows), the productivity of France's businesses (notwithstanding the 35 hour work week which Chirac said had

been very costly to the French economy), and France's healthy rate of population growth and well-educated workforce. However, Chirac also repeatedly focused on the "principal problem" of unemployment. He called unemployment a "wound that is not inevitable" and a "something that must be tackled frontally." Chirac ended his remarks by announcing a new initiative -- in the form of another state agency -- aimed at better coordinating France's state-sponsored scientific and engineering research and the business sector's product innovation (reftel).

COMMENT: NOT ON THE COMEBACK TRAIL

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15. (C) Chirac's performance was weak, and is unlikely to give even temporary buoyancy to his sinking presidency. Throughout the interview Chirac was clearly intent on getting his points across, but also oddly absent. Many media commentators, in different ways, noted that there was a surreal tinge to the president's performance -- as if he was actor in the part of President Chirac, but playing it somewhat distractedly, with diminishing conviction. Chirac incredibly claimed that he "had drawn strength" from the people's message in voting 'no' to the proposed constitution. Pundits have been repeating that those who claim to know Chirac say that the May 29 defeat was a stunning blow to him, and add that Chirac's partisans claim that he's now determined to climb back into the saddle, grit his teeth and ride out the last 21 months of his presidency with as much engagement and dignity as possible. Whatever the truth of Chirac's take on his situation and prospects, it's clear that the public, for now, has largely written him off as a vital force in French politics. All polls show the public views Chirac as a has-been, unlikely to contribute much to leading France into the future. Chirac's Bastille Day performance did little to auger any comeback from that verdict. End Comment.  
STAPLETON